Some research on young and very young language learners

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With more and more second/foreign language learners beginning at ever earlier ages, it is worth consider our definitions of young learners and the implications of research with these populations for language teaching.

Second language acquisition versus bilingualism

Indeed, child SLA is often misunderstood by language educators. It may be confused with bilingualism, or dismissed on the grounds that "children somehow absorb language easily and more quickly than adults" (Copland & Yonetsugi 2016: 224).

Philp, Oliver and Mackey (2008) set a cut-off for bilingual acquisition, where the learner's two grammars develop simultaneously, at age 2. From 2 years onwards, it is more accurate to talk about L2 acquisition, considering that the new grammar is being acquired after the first. According to Nicholas and Lightbown (2008: 38), child L2 acquisition differs from adult SLA in a number of ways, and can involve extended silent periods code switching/mixing transfer of L1 word order imaginative play.

The next cut-off occurs at age 7. Young learners starting before age 7 generally achieve native-like proficiency, whereas "the proportion of native-like proficiency outcomes progressively decreases" among learners who begin after that age, probably due to the development of literacy (Nicholas & Lightbown, 2008).

This research suggests first that it is important to distinguish a) young learners who are first exposed to a second language from the age of 2 from b) bilingual speakers. Second, it is necessary to take into account the different needs and expected attainment of learners before and after age 7.

Indeed, Muñoz and Singleton (2011:16-17) suggest that younger child learners are likely to achieve higher proficiency, while older learners will make quicker progress: older learners have a rate advantage, whereas younger learners have an ultimate attainment advantage

Muñoz and Singleton (2011)

Teaching young and very young learners

These authors however issue an important caveat: we should not compare classroom learners with learners 'in the wild,' since "in a typical limited-input foreign language setting," these authors warn that "age does not yield the same type of long-term advantage as it does in a naturalistic language learning setting" (ibid.:19)

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Although "more and more children are learning languages at younger ages" (Pinter 2014: 179), and

pedagogical practice now generally divides very young learners from older ones (Nikolov & Djigunovic 2011; Bland 2015), not many studies have yet been carried out to test instructional effects.

Very young EFL learners in Dutch schools

One exception is Dutch research on very young learners of English in the Netherlands. A recent study involved 168 four-year old EFL learners who received up to one hour, two hours, or over two hours of exposure per week in Dutch schools. They were compared with a control group of four-year old pupils who were not receiving EFL instruction (De Bot 2014; Unsworth, Persson, Prins & De Bot 2014).

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Overall effectiveness of early intervention

Tests conducted after one year of instruction, and again after the second year showed an advantage in grammar for all EFL pupils, and a significant difference for those who received more than one hour of English per week.

the children in early EFL programmes scored significantly higher than children who were not in such programmes and when analysed in groups, after controlling for the effect of teachers' language proficiency, those with more than 60 min of weekly classroom exposure scored on average significantly higher than those with 60 min or less

Unsworth et al. 2014: 13

Amount of target language exposure

Interestingly, however, young pupils who had less than one hour of English per week performed no better on vocabulary acquisition than those who had no English teaching at all.

all children participating in early EFL programmes scored significantly higher than the control children for grammar, but for vocabulary, there was no significant difference between the control children and the EFL children with 60 min or less of lessons per week

Unsworth et al. 2014: 15

The authors acknowledge that the specific context of English in the Netherlands is likely to have played a role: English is of course typologically related to Dutch and relatively prevalent as a global language present in films and digital games, and used by second language speakers. Thus the control group of uninstructed EFL learners were no doubt exposed to English in their everyday lives.

The study also sought to quantify the acquisition that occurred in these very young learner classrooms. The pupils in the study who had at least one hour of classroom EFL instruction "were found to acquire as much English in 2 years' time as young monolingual English-speaking children do in approximately 5 months" (Unsworth et al. 2014: 14). These figures may appear unimpressive at first glance, but remember that the classroom learners received much less language input and fewer opportunities to

interact in the target language than monolingual English children acquiring at home. (They are also continuing to acquire Dutch L1.)

Teacher proficiency

Following Muñoz and Singleton's (2011) recommendation to use "the teacher's input rather than some general conception of native speaker norms as the model against which to measure learners' achievement," this study also investigated teachers' proficiency.

When divided into teacher proficiency groups, and after controlling for min- utes/week, children with an NNS teacher at CEFR-B level only were found to score significantly lower than the other groups and they developed significantly more slowly over time, at least for vocabulary. The results of the regression analyses suggest, however, that teachers' language proficiency rather than minutes/week is the best predictor of children's scores on both vocabulary and grammar

Unsworth et al. 2014: 13

They found a teacher with CER level C or native proficiency to be "a good predictor of the results for vocabulary after 1 year and of the results for grammar after 2 years." They interpret this finding as support for "the importance of teacher's own proficiency level," while also suggesting that "NS teachers are not necessary" for very young learner L2 development (Unsworth et al., 2014: 18).

Some conclusions from research

Here are some findings to be drawn from research into early L2 teaching and learning:

1. Child L2 language is qualitatively different from older learner language particularly in pragmatics; spontaneous, playful and idiosyncratic L2 use is much more common among young learners (Philp et al., 2008).

2. Very young learners (aged 2-7) can usefully be distinguished from older learners (7-12), as the characteristics of their language production and use change with the development of literacy (Nicolas and Lightbown, 2008).

3. The popular trend towards beginning L2 instruction "the earlier the better" enjoys only tentative empirical support: thresholds for both quantity and quality of input appear to apply (Munoz and Singleton, 2011; Unsworth et al., 2014).

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